



Review: [Untitled]

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Blue Velvet by David Lynch

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3. Javier Castro, "20 Años de Mercado Cinematográfico Español," *Cineinforme*, Edición Especial, No 494 (Septiembre 1986), pp. 70-71.
4. Francisco Llinas, *4 Años de Cine Español* (1983-86). Madrid: Festival Internacional de Cine de Madrid, IMAGFIC, 1987, p. 99.
5. Quoted by Peter Besas in *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish*

Cinema under Fascism and Democracy. Denver: Arden Press, 1985, p. 216.

6. John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema After Franco*. London: BFI, 1986, p. 239. Although Marco Ferreri is Italian, his earliest features were made in Spain and had enough influence to assure him an important place in the history of Spanish cinema.

Reviews

BLUE VELVET

Directed by David Lynch. Script: Lynch. Photography: Frederick Elmes. Editor: Duwayne Dunham. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. DeLaurentiis.

Much of the humor in David Lynch's reworked fifties crime thriller/horror/gothic film *Blue Velvet* comes from mundane statements which, when filtered by his personal vision, appear weird, but still oddly familiar, just as the opening shots of flowers against a white picket fence and a waving fireman seem filtered and unnatural, and yet commonplace. One such mundane statement comes from Jeff (Kyle MacLachlan), the film's protagonist, as he woos Sandy (Laura Dern): "Yeah . . . You're a mystery . . . I like you . . . very much." The "line," in all its banality, conflicts with Sandy's apparent obviousness. She is the perfect pretty high school senior girl, dates a football player, favors pastel sundresses, and is flattered by and responsive to the attentions of handsome college man Jeff. Dad is a local police detective and Mom helps her get ready for dates. But despite her appearance, we never learn much about what Sandy is like underneath the surface; and in the world of *Blue Velvet* what is hidden under the surface can be most fascinating—and horrifying.

It is Sandy, specifically her look, that I propose to focus on as a crucial element in the film. Many feminist theorists have argued that the woman in film never has access to the "gaze." Beginning with this assumption, Ann Kaplan is led to ask: "First, is the gaze necessarily male? . . . Could we structure things so that women own the gaze? If this were possible, would women want to own the gaze?"¹ In this case, of course, the concept of "gaze" is deployed metaphorically to refer to power, especially the power to control sexuality. Still, the act of looking within a film is frequently invoked (quite concretely) as it pertains to men looking at women and seldom the other way

around. Judith Mayne asks: "How are the relations of seeing, the relation of a person looking and a person looked at, power-bound? As film viewers, we have spent more time than we realize watching men and women look at each other, and, most emphatically, watching men watching women."² *Blue Velvet* offers a case study in how women watch men and how the relation of a person looking and a person looked at may depict formulations other than control and power (scopophilia and fetishism, as Laura Mulvey has described them³).

Blue Velvet is particularly relevant to such concerns because of its approach to all of its content. An ordinary cinematic subject (boy solves mystery and wins girl) is presented not as something natural and fulfilling, but in a dark, multileveled—we might even say twisted—way, encouraging the spectator to question his/her reactions to this standard material. It also provides striking examples of several varieties of looking. One woman, Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini), is both a victim and an appropriator of the traditionally considered "male gaze." Her opposite, the mysterious Sandy, offers an alternative type of looking. Sandy appears for the first time in the film by emerging from complete darkness. This stunning shot hints at her mysteriousness and unknowability; we don't understand where she has come or how she got there, either physically or psychically. Sandy's gaze is a critical feature of *Blue Velvet*, but to a great extent the film elides her nature, takes her participation for granted. It would be best to begin then, not with her, but with the more obvious focus of the film—the hero's activities and personality—and return later to the more complex problems that Sandy's simplicity raises.

Although Sandy's psychology is never examined, the importance of delving down to find hidden things is emphasized early in the film. At the end of the first scene the camera descends from a full shot of a front yard to a

close-up of slimy insects squirming beneath blades of grass. This examining descent is a visual analogue to psychoanalytic theory and the idea of delving into a person's unconscious to understand and explain feelings and behaviors—a theory that pervades the film and one which I will draw on in my analysis. Lynch's own explanation of his creative process is, perhaps deliberately, an illustration of how to avoid the modifications of what Freudians call "secondary revision" acting on our thoughts as they make themselves available: "I strictly go by ideas that come to me. And, I really feel that ideas when you catch them have a tremendous amount of power. Maybe it's a fuzzy sort of glimpse of it, but if you start writing you realize that you actually saw a lot more at first than you thought you did and these things start unfolding. And then, the trick is to translate them as true as possible to the original thing and they, I think, maintain a power, if you do that."⁴

Blue Velvet examines the hidden, the inside, not only of a small town (Lumberton), but also the unconscious of young Jeff. His investigation of a local ear-severing mystery is also an investigation of self. The film begins with Jeff's father who, while watering the lawn, is mysteriously stricken. This removal of the father is the first of many Oedipal aspects of the story. Except for a few brief scenes in which he utters but one line, Jeff's father is literally "out of the picture." Returning from a hospital visit with his incapacitated father, Jeff discovers an ear which he immediately hands over to a local police officer and neighbor, Detective Williams. Jeff's curiosity is aroused, however, and we zoom into an extreme close-up of the severed ear. The camera movement echos that of the descent into the grass. We go inside the ear, inside Jeff's mind, and it is not until the final sequence, when the camera zooms out of an extreme close-up of Jeff's ear, that we will return to relative normality.

After an unfruitful interview with Williams, Jeff meets Williams's eavesdropping daughter Sandy outside the family home. She tells him she knows something about the ear and gives him the address of a nightclub singer named Dorothy who lives near-by—who, she believes, is somehow involved in the case. It is this information that impels Jeff to sneak into Dorothy's apartment to spy on her. He learns that she is being used as a sex slave by badman Frank



The woman's gaze: Laura in BLUE VELVET

Booth (Dennis Hopper) who has kidnapped her husband and son. Jeff's curiosity soon enmeshes him in the intrigue. By the end of the film, he has had an affair with Dorothy, killed Frank, and won Sandy's love.

Jeff's initial foray into Dorothy's apartment sets the stage for a graphic acting out of the Oedipal conflict. Throughout the film, Dorothy is set up as a mother figure. We first see her talking on the phone to her young son. When she appears, much later, naked and battered, Sandy's startled boyfriend asks Jeff, "Is that your mother?" Her apartment even has a red color and curved entry reminiscent of a womb. Similarly, the evil Frank is associated with Jeff's own father. In a subjective thought sequence, Jeff sees his father's reflection distorted by a curved mirror; this image is immediately followed by a shot of Frank. The noise Frank makes breathing out of a gas mask recalls the sound of Jeff's father as he lies, connected to medical equipment, in his hospital bed. It is the sexual activity of this strange couple—Dorothy/mother, Frank/father—that Jeff sees while peeping out of a closet. This scene clearly invokes Freud's "primal scene," when the small child discovers his parents making love. It begins when Jeff, while hiding in the closet, watches as Dorothy arrives at the apartment alone, receives a phone call, and undresses. The dialogue in this sequence emphasizes the con-



What Jeff sees: the primal scene

nection between looking and power. Discovering Jeff in the closet, Dorothy forces him at knifepoint to tell her, "What did you see?" She angrily asks, "How many times have you sneaked into girls' apartments and watched them undress?" Wielding a phallic knife, Dorothy then appropriates this controlling gaze; she orders Jeff to strip so she can look at him. Kneeling in front of him, the knife poised threateningly at his crotch, Dorothy arouses her victim while ordering him not to touch her or look at her. She turns the tables on him by denying him his look, forcing him to appear naked and vulnerable, and appropriating a male gaze and sexuality, here clearly associated with violence.

The scene is interrupted by Frank's arrival. With Jeff back in the closet, Frank turns the voyeuristic, sadistic gaze back on Dorothy. Ordering her, "Don't look at me," he forces her to display herself. Referring to himself as "baby" and to Dorothy as "mommy," he strikes her and verbally abuses her until he reaches his climax. Hopper's maniacal performance here and throughout the film creates a sense of sadism beyond sanity. Seeing, but unseen, Jeff watches this brutalization unprotestingly.

The Oedipal configuration suggested in this early scene will be completed later; Jeff has sex with Dorothy and, at the film's climax, kills Frank.

Additional scenes reinforce the conception of these three characters as a family, offering parodic versions of typical small-town family scenes: father returning from work; mom, dad and son visiting friends; and the family drive.

As Jeff becomes more deeply involved with the Lumberton underworld, he simultaneously develops a relationship with good girl Sandy. Although she provides the initial impetus for

Jeff's investigation, she remains outside real participation. She agrees to "help" Jeff on two occasions, but each time her assistance is annulled. Jeff first asks her to create a diversion at Dorothy's apartment; as she approaches the apartment, however, another visitor beats her to the door. "He did my job for me," explains Sandy. That night she offers to wait outside the apartment building and signal Jeff when Dorothy approaches, allowing him time to hide, but just as she honks her horn, Jeff drowns out the sound with a toilet flush. Sandy's active participation is completely undermined.

However, Sandy cannot be dismissed as merely passive and ineffectual. She is an important player in Jeff's psychosexual development as a counterpart to/replacement of mother figure Dorothy. The nature of dependence of the infant on the mother consists of a paradoxical situation where the mother provides a secure "holding environment" while simultaneously presenting the infant with stimuli. Because the infant psychologically anticipates this care, the mother initially is internalized as an object from which he/she does not distinguish him/herself. It is only through the object's symbolic destruction that the infant can discover "externality."⁵

Jeff must free himself from the suffocating, maternal love of Dorothy, to take his place with the external-object mother, Sandy. At the end of the film, Dorothy is destroyed, hauled off in an ambulance with a gas mask which echoes Frank's. She appears briefly, recovered, in a sort of coda to the film, but she no longer has a connection to our hero Jeff. The resolution of Jeff's Oedipal conflict—and the slow zoom out from his ear which symbolically removes us from his unconscious—finds him happily coupled with Sandy.

Through his renunciation of the omnipotent internal-object mother, he assumes a position to make use of the external object—in this case, Sandy. Sandy is further positioned in a maternal role by her relationship to her football playing boyfriend Mike, yet another "bad" father (he tries to attack Jeff and deny Sandy the ability to speak) and by her status at the conclusion as prospective mother to Jeff's children. Jeff is the little boy fluctuating between the two mothers—just as the infant fluctuates between the security of the holding environment and the stimulation of desire.

As this formulation unfolds in *Blue Velvet*,

an implicit tension develops between Sandy and Dorothy, related but not limited to a sexual rivalry. After Frank brutalizes Dorothy, Jeff attempts to cover her with a fringed shawl which she pushes away, saying, "No, I don't like that." Later, for her big date with Jeff, Sandy will wear a sundress of similar material. This tension reaches its apex when Jeff and Sandy discover Dorothy, naked and beat-up outside on Jeff's front lawn. They drive her to Sandy's house to call for an ambulance, and Sandy begins to apprehend Jeff's sexual relationship with Dorothy. Betrayed, her mouth distorted in anger, Sandy slaps Jeff and sends him away.

Until now we have dwelt exclusively on Jeff's psychological development. This crucial scene, where Sandy's look results in knowledge and action, appropriately signals an alternative approach. I will now concentrate on Sandy and her look, returning to this moment of revelation to see it, perhaps, from a different perspective.

Sandy's "look," directed throughout *Blue Velvet* almost exclusively at Jeff, can be divided into two major functions which may operate simultaneously: investigation and affirmation. Agreeing to help Jeff investigate the woman on Lincoln Boulevard, Sandy utters a line transfigured by context to belie itself. Having offered to break a date with boyfriend Mike so she can accompany Jeff on a spy mission *cum* dinner date, Sandy announces, "Just so you understand. I love Mike." The context, her previous statements, and her delivery all serve to undercut this assertion; the line, contrary to its content, serves to highlight the growing attraction between Jeff and Sandy. Set against this attraction is Sandy's reluctance and doubt about Jeff's plan to spy on Dorothy in her apartment. Before parting, Sandy announces the subject of her own investigation, saying, "I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert." This question again connects Jeff to the Oedipus myth. Like Oedipus, who discovers that his country's blight is the result of his own perversion, Jeff will learn that he is both detective *and* pervert. He playfully replies, "That's for me to know and you to find out." In fact, this ostensible investigation of the severed ear is as revealing of his psychic self as it is of small-town sex crimes. Sandy's inquiry at this moment reflects his own concerns.

Tania Modleski gives a vivid description of

this female inquiry which seeks to determine if a man, the object of possible affections, is good or bad, worthy or vile, a detective (innocent) or a pervert (guilty). "The Harlequin heroine probes for the secret underlying the masculine enigma, while the reader outwits the heroine in coming up with the 'correct' interpretation of the puzzling actions and attitudes of the man. In Gothics the heroine, in the classic paranoid manner, broods over the slightest fluctuation in the hero's emotional temperature or facial expression, quick to detect in these alterations possible threats to her very life."⁶ Modleski discusses the Gothic novel and the heroine's often neurotic paranoia as she turns an investigative look on the man with whom she is coupled—as wife, fiancée, servant. "She tries to convince herself that her suspicions are unfounded, that, since she loves him, he must be trustworthy and that she will have failed as a woman if she does not implicitly believe in him."⁷

Aside from her jeopardized affections, an additional motivation to continue to "believe in him" is her own status: generally at his mercy. Being either economically or legally as well as emotionally bound, she has little choice but to "stand by her man."

The same conflict appears frequently in fairy tales where a princess is expected to love and be faithful to the male although he be in monstrous form (beast, frog, disfigured). If she accepts him and loves him unconditionally, she can avert disaster (his blindness, death or perpetual disfigurement). If Sandy is not exactly a princess, she is cast somewhat in this role. In one scene—the only time when she and Jeff are in the car together that she drives—Sandy relates a fairy tale-like dream she had about robins bringing happiness to Earth. In this scene, she is the blonde fairy-tale princess and the Gothic heroine, who must continue to love and trust her man despite appearances.

In *Blue Velvet*, the test comes in the scene discussed earlier when Sandy discovers Jeff's liaison with Dorothy. Jeff is not a beast or a frog or even a brooding aristocrat with a mad-woman wife in the attic, but Sandy does see him clutched by a naked, battered nightclub singer who is evidently his lover.

Sandy's anger, which causes her to slap Jeff, is perhaps partly sexual jealousy, but primarily the result of seeing the monstrousness that had been hidden. Her perfect fairy-tale dream has

been tainted by his true nature. ("This hurts my dream," she laments to herself in a later scene after forgiving him over the telephone.) She has investigated him, the results are not all that she had hoped, but having committed to him (she tells him she loves him at a party earlier) she will continue to stand by him. This duality within Jeff's nature reinforces his Oedipal identification: he is the site of evil and the revealer of evil as well.

In her discussion of the woman's enquiring look, Judith Mayne has described how an alliance with a man authorizes the woman's investigations.⁸ Sandy is the catalyst, Jeff the authority in an alliance they form. Their common investigation is characterized by two notable aspects. First, it is his nature that is the subject of the project. Although he allegedly hopes to solve a possible murder, the story's unfolding reveals much about his psychological conflicts and serves to advance and coalesce his relationships. We see the violence and disorder hidden inside this outwardly virtuous young man. Taunted by Dorothy, he succumbs to an impulse to strike her during love-making. The association of violence and sex is later reprised when, appearing obviously bruised at the breakfast table, he cautions his inquisitive Aunt Barbara, "I love you, but you're going to get it." Although Jeff is shown as being repelled by his actions with Dorothy, this later scene suggests that his cruel impulses are just beneath the surface and even motivate seemingly innocent statements to elderly relatives.

This decision to study the male, like so much of the film, reflects psychoanalytic theory which for the most part attempts to understand the formation of the male while ignoring, or grafting on in an unlikely way, the formation of the female. In this sense, Sandy is a mystery, as Jeff points out.

Second, his investigative behavior is characterized by action: he drives around, takes pictures, talks to people, gets beat up, all in a traditionally active, masculine way. Conversely, her behavior is almost entirely passive. She understands things by intuition, by looking and listening. Instead of a crystal ball, she gazes into Jeff's eyes, she watches his expressions as he drives, she even stares at a door behind which Jeff is talking to her father.

This investigative look offers, if not exactly subjectivity for women, at least some free play

in their positioning. The fact that women in films generally employ this look to investigate men reflects a woman's powerlessness and the importance of knowing the man before it is too late (a point usually marked by the marriage ceremony). It is not simply paranoia that motivates the investigative look, but a genuine need for information.

Despite the importance of this function, when Sandy looks at Jeff in *Blue Velvet* it is clear that something besides investigation is going on. There is a sense of appreciation and participation that Sandy conveys with her look and Jeff cultivates through his behavior. This corresponds with the second function of her look: affirmation.

When Jeff and Sandy meet for the first time in the film, Jeff performs a little stunt he calls "the chicken walk" for Sandy. The scene recalls other instances of male display: juggling, card tricks, fighting, fast driving, and excessive eating performances. Sandy's response to what can only be considered a ridiculous exhibition is to laugh and say, "That's kind of interesting." Like her previous statement about loving Mike, circumstances, line delivery, and the actual composition serve to undercut Sandy's remark, revealing it as a lie. Sandy, like the audience, does not find it interesting, but silly. Her desire to encourage and praise—to cheerlead for Jeff—and his need to receive these attentions are set up in this scene. In addition to her words, she will encourage and praise him through her look. Here, and throughout the rest of the film, she will focus an affirming gaze on Jeff as he speaks, dances, drives, etc., constantly encouraging him through her attention, although at times her words may become cautionary.

Sandy is like the cinema-goer who wishes to preserve all films as good objects despite their individual fallibility.⁹ In this case, Jeff is the proposed good object, and Sandy maintains him as such through her appreciative and attentive manner. Just as the investigative look offers at least a possibility of woman as subject, this affirming look offers a possibility of audience identification with the woman character. Sandy is concerned with Jeff's "performance" and committed to him remaining good and pleasurable, just as the audience is similarly concerned with the film's "performance." In one scene, Sandy's status as audience is rein-

forced. Jeff has just proposed a stakeout of Frank Booth's apartment building. Instead of letting the action unfold, Lynch cuts to Jeff and Sandy. Jeff relates what happened over shots of the stakeout. These shots are played for Sandy's enlightenment, just as the film plays for our benefit.

In another sense, though, we must question the implications of this passive observation, as opposed to active doing, for the woman in film. This type of relating, serving to bind the couple through their joint interest in some common endeavor, has been typically considered to be dependent and regressive. However, it is possible to view this "greater tendency for affiliativeness,"¹⁰ which we see in Sandy's tenacious affirmation of Jeff, in a less loaded way. Through identification with the caretaking mother, the female child develops a "sense of self (which) derives from the individual interacting within a relationship rather than by separating."¹¹ Sandy's affirming look, then, can relate to her role as external-object mother to Jeff and also to her desire for affiliativeness developed through identification with her own mother. That the common endeavors that generally bind the couple are his and the burden for maintaining the relationship hers is clearly not a positive aspect, yet the concept of affiliativeness, nurturance, and interaction can be seen as a valuable alternative to the appropriation of the male gaze. This appropriation is not necessarily a viable alternative, or even a desirable one.

This look of affirmation, like the investigative look, is not, of course, unique to *Blue Velvet*, but can be found throughout film, television, and other media such as the publicity poster. The poster for *Saturday Night Fever*, to offer just one example, depicted a white-suited John Travolta looking confidently at the viewer. His female partner clings to his side while gazing intently up at his face. The question is not whether this stereotyped construction of roles exists, but whether its identification and study can offer any possibilities for either an alternative film reading or film practice. *Blue Velvet* offers traditional constructions of men looking at women and women looking at men, but by virtue of its power, quirkiness, and difference, particularly in the realm of tone, the established romantic couple that is presented in the end cannot be taken for granted. Sandy's irony operates like that of the opening shots.

Why do these common images, this simple girl draw such nervous laughter? Perhaps a barely perceptible filter on the flowers, a slight slow motion to the fireman's wave, a mild angularity in Sandy's features are enough to throw us off-kilter. Despite the apparent simplicity, we know that all is not as it should be. We are confronted with mystery. The scene of the women fixing lunch in the kitchen while the men garden does not necessarily depict paradise—as the suspiciously mechanical-looking robin that brings happiness so clearly suggests by bringing a dead insect as well.

But there is still one more problem. Like the film, this analysis ends with a hero fully plumed, his psychic self dissected like a frog, and a heroine who remains a mystery. As played by Laura Dern, Sandy is likable yet enigmatic. This accomplished, "up-and-coming" actress has spent three films discovering romantic love: as the blind girl who "sees" a deformed boy's true beauty in *Mask*; as a teen-ager allegorically awakening to her sexual desires in *Smooth Talk*; and in *Blue Velvet*, finally wanting to settle down with the man of her dreams (or, rather, the man in Lynch's dreams). While Jeff's psychosexual development has been rigorously depicted, Sandy remains a mystery. Sandy looks, but although she is firmly established as the sexual partner—as Dorothy is established as the mother—she is hardly available for feminist appropriation. Investigation and affiliativeness are valuable and valid, but perhaps it is time the gaze shifted.

In a late scene in *Blue Velvet*, Sandy is shown reflected in, but turned away from, a mirror in her pink bedroom as she speaks via telephone to Jeff. Her worried questions reveal that she wonders what he is doing, whether they have a future together. Sandy's failure is that she never turns around and looks at herself.

—TRACY BIGA

VOYAGE TO CYTHERA

Director: Theodore Angelopoulos. Script: Angelopoulos, Th. Vaitinos, and Antonin Guerra. Photography: Georges Arvanatis. Music: Helen Karaidrou. Produced by A Productions, ZDF, Channel 4, Greek TV, and Center of Greek Cinema.

The prize that *Voyage to Cythera* received at Cannes was late recognition of the talent an-